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ABSTRACT

Society does not view rape seriously. Few rape crimes are successfully prosecuted. Rape results in permanent alteration of the victim's life. Besides street rape there is no consensus on the definition of rape. This study attempts to gather people's perceptions of rape. Subjects (N=96) were approached randomly and accepted if they fit into desired gender and socioeconomic group blocks. A questionnaire using semantic differential was given to participants who defined rape relative to other constructs in their semantic spaces. Four concepts (rape, seduction, assault, and making love) were used and grouped in different orders to avoid association bias. Participants were told that the survey was about a variety of topics and the construct rape was not mentioned. The results showed that males viewed seduction and making love as similar, while females viewed seduction and assault as similar. Socioeconomic group did not have any effect except in interaction between gender and socioeconomic group on the assault-making love semantic space. Race and family type had no effects. Thirty percent of the male and 35 percent of the female respondents reported that they or someone they knew had a prior rape incident. For those reporting this prior experience, the gender effect was negated and males viewed assault and seduction as more similar to rape than to making love. Further rape research might utilize this important variable. (ABL)

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PERCEPTIONS OF RAPE

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PERCEPTIONS OF RAPE

Barbara J. Witten, Ph.D. and Rory Reser, Ph.D.

For Presentation at

AERA

Chicago. April, 1985

When the headline of a major newspaper article (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1984) reads: "Serious Crime Down", and the accompanying article goes on to indicate that the rate of rape (and assault) is drastically up, something is wrong. Such incongruities seem to indicate a problem in the way our society views or defines what is a serious, traumatic, life destroying act (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 237).

Estimates (depending on how rape is defined) are that over 25% of all females (and about one in eight males) will suffer at least one physical violation (rape, sexual abuse, etc.) during their lifetimes (Herman, 1983; Russell, 1983). Of these crimes, about ten percent will be reported; only ten percent of these will result in successful prosecution (Burt & Albin, 1981; Koss, 1983; Shrier, 1981). At the risk of sounding "unscientific", these figures are appalling.

When a person is raped, not only is the course of the victim's life permanently changed, but so are the lives of everyone with whom the victim interacts, whether those involved realize it or not (Berglas, 1985; Stark, 1985). Besides the obvious consequences - personal violation and injury, perpetual fear, relationship degeneration - life patterns are also altered (for example, parenting and child-rearing practices, interactional styles, etc.) (Becker & Skinner, 1983; Vernon & Best, 1983).

With the effects so pervasive and usually so apparent, why do the attitudes and perceptions of members of our society (such as those reflected in newspaper headlines like that cited above, rape jokes, reactions to victims and offenders ("victors"?) and advice given to prevent or foster recovery from rape) persist? We believe, in part, because the answer is certainly not simple, that the reasons have to do with socio-cultural transmission of gender expectations (Lawson & Hillix, 1985) and the propogation of rape "myths" (Burt, 1980; Shrier, 1981).

Unlike Burt (1980), we believe there is no simple causal relationship between rape "myths" and public reactions; rather there is a complex interaction. At the core of this problem may be the definition of rape itself. There are almost as

many definitions of the act of rape as there articles on the subject (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Burt & Albin, 1981; Kilpatrick, 1983; Koss, 1983). "There appears to be no public concensus ... as to what constitutes rape, with the exception of a sterotypic 'street' rape" (Williams, 1979, p. 4). These variations cause difficulties not only in research (e.g., different reports of rape prevalence), but in the prevention of rape and dealing with people's reactions (e.g., juries) as well.

Accordingly, we have attempted to gather data on people's basic perceptions of the act of rape (rather than on perceptions of victims or other circumstances surrounding the crime). Using a semantic differential, we asked respondents to define rape relative to other constructs in their semantic spaces. Collecting such basic information could provide an essential foundation for further work on rape, both research and intervention.

Methodology

Major Constructs

Four concepts, "rape", "seduction", "assualt", and "making love" were studied. It was hypothesized that males would view "making love" and "seduction" as similar, while females would view "rape", "seduction", and "assault" as similar.

Item Construction

Osgood's semantic differential methodology (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1975) was used. Five pairs of words from each of three dimensions (evaluation, potentecy, and activity) were selected. For seven of the fifteen pairs, the direction of the scaling was reversed (e.g., good-bad was reversed to bad-good),

to reduce the possibility of creating a response bias. A seven point scale (very dissimilar, quite dissimilar, slightly dissimilar, equally similar, slightly similar, quite similar, and very similar) was used with each pair of words). The fifteen pairs were presented four times, in association with each of the four major constructs.

Another concern was the potential ordering effect of the constructs (e.g., would the fact that "seduction" followed "making love" influence the responses?). To distribute any possible effect from the order of presentation of the constructs randomly, the ninety-six questionnaires were created so that there were four sets of each of the 24 possible orders of the four constructs.

Similarly, the fifteen pairs of words on each page were also reordered. The fifteen pairs were randomly ordered four times. All "rape" pages contained the same order of pairs, all "assault" pages contained a different order, and so on. These procedures were employed to counter any potential response bias based on order of presentation.

Procedures were taken during the data analysis to realign all pages and all pairs of words, so that comparisons could be made.

Survey Instrument

Each survey contained a cover letter explaining the nature of the study, and an instruction sheet with an examples of how to complete semantic differential, four randomly ordered pages related to each of the four concepts, and a demographic sheet. The following demographic data was collected upon completion of the semantic differential: age, family type, occupation, ethnic status, income level, and prior experience of any family member or close friend with a rape incident.

Subject Selection

Other researchers have found that certain variables - e.g., social context (Lazarus, 1981), gender role expectations (Lawson & Hillix, 1985) - have affected

reactions and attitudes toward rape victies. To assess similar effects on perceptions, gender and SES were used as blocking variables in selectio of respondents. Demographic inforeation on respondents was also collected and employed in the analysis.

Ninety six subjects were selected from the population of a moderately urban southeastern city. The ninety six were blocked into six cells of sixteen subjects each, a two factor design with two gender levels (males, females) by three social economic (SES) levels (high, medium, low). (Hollingshead,)

Confidentiality

No names or addresses of subjects were collected. The only identifying data were the demographics, as listed above. Identification numbers were assigned to each completed survey form as it was received; gender of data collector was also recorded at that time.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected by sixteen graduate students (8 females and 8 males). Each approached one design block of six subjects (high/medium/low SES males, and high/medium/low SES females). Subjects were approached in public places (e.g., shopping centers), and asked if they were willing to participate in a research project sponsored by the University. They were then asked to indicate which of three family income levels they had. The data collector could thereby determine whether this particular individual was needed for their design block. If they were not needed (e.g., male indicated high income, and data collector already had secured one male high income participant), they were thanked for their cooperation and told that they did not need to continue further. Individuals who were to participate were then given further instructions by the data collector. Each data collector continued soliciting subjects in this manner until their design block was completed.

Training of Data Collectors

Volunteers to collect data were solicited from graduate students in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. Two groups of training sessions were held. During those sessions copies of the questionnaire were distributed to all data collectors. Instructions on how to approach individuals and solicit their consent in the study were demonstrated. The nature of the study was full explained to data collectors so that they could appropriately answer questions that they might be asked. Pilot data was collected to further refine the data collection procedures. Each data collector was then given a set of six questionnaires and instructions to collect their design block of subjects. The twenty four possible orders of questionnaires were evenly distributed to male and female data collectors.

Instructions for Participants

Those individuals who were needed as subjects were asked to spend about fifteen minutes completing a questionaire about peoples' attitudes toward a variety of topics. The construct of rape was not mentioned in the approaching of potential subjects, nor in the instructions, to avoid self-selection bias of volunteers. Participants were told that they might withdraw from the study at any time, that their names were not being recorded, and that their responses would remain anonymous.

If the individual agreed to continue, they were given a sheet with instructions and examples of how to rate the semantic differential. Data collectors were available to answer any questions about how to complete the forms. Upon completion of the questionnaire, particpants were also asked to complete a demographic information sheet.

Data Analysis

The raw data (responses on a scale from 1 to 7) for each pair of words for each construct (15 pairs by four constructs, for 60 responses), and demographic information was recorded. Transformations were made to realign the order of pairs of words for all constructs, and to correct for the earlier scaling-reversal.

Total scores for each construct were not used, since an individual with a response pattern of 1s and 7s could have the same total score as an individual with a response pattern of 4s and 5s. Instead, six correlations were calculated to reflect the semantic overlap of the concepts for each subject: rape-assault, rape-seduction, rape-making love, seduction-assault, seduction-making love, and assault-making love. A high z-score indicates that the individual reported the two concepts to be similar. A low (negative) z-score is indicative of reported dissimilarity in the concepts. The z-scores were then subjected to 2x3x6 repeated measures analysis of varience.

Results

Descriptive Information

Twenty four percent of the subjects in this study were single; 14% percent were divorced; and 60 percent were living in a traditional dual parent household. Family status differed according to social economic level. Fourty eight percent of low SES subjects were single, and 33% were in a traditional two parent household. For high SES subjects, none were single, 87% were in traditional families, and less than 10% were divorced. Middle SES were distributed 27% single, 15% divorced, and 58% traditional families. There were no differences in family patterns between males and females.

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Eighty one percent of subjects were White, and fifteen percent were Black. Three percent were Hispanic and Native American. Race varied with SES levels. Ninety seven percent of high SES subjects were white, 85% of middle SES were white, and 61% of low SES were White. There were no differences in race by gender: 84% of males subjects and 80% of females subjects were White.

A suprising finding was related to the prior rape experience reported by subjects. Thirty-three percent of these respondents indicated that they or a close family member or friend had had a prior rape incident of which they were aware. There was little difference by gender: 30% of males and 35% of females reported such experience. Prior rape experience was also relatively evenly distributed acrossed SES levels: 28% of low SES, 39% of middle SES, and 30% of high SES subjects reported prior rape incidents.

Mean age of subjects varied slightly by gender and SES. The mean ages of males subjects were 24.7 for low SES, 30.5 for middle SES, and 39.2 for high SES. For females the ages were: 36.7 for low, 30.5 for middle, and 33.6 for high SES.

Gender by SES

Repeated measures analysis of variance and multivariate procedures were used to evaluate the effects of gender and SES on semantic space. Significant results were found for the assault-seduction semantic space. A significant overall F, and a significant gender by SES interaction were found. Post hoc comparisons indicated a significant difference in mean scores by gender: females viewed assault and seduction more similar than males. The gender by SES interaction revealed that high SES females viewed assault and seduction most similar and low SES males viewed assault and seduction most different. Table 1 displays the mean scores by gender and SES for the assault-seduction semantic space.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results approaching significance (p=.10) were found for the seduction-making love semantic space. Further analysis indicated a highly significant gender by SES interaction. No overall gender or overall SES affects were found. The mean scores for gender by SES for seduction-making love semantic space are displayed in Table 2. High SES women and middle SES males reported less relationship between seduction and making love. The other four groups, high and low SES males, and middle and low SES females, showed a moderate relationship between seduction and making love.

Insert Table 2 about here

Multivariate analysis of variances procedures were also used to test the effects of gender and SES across the six semantic spaces. MANOVA results indicated a highly significant overall gender effect (F=3.14, df 6,84, p =0.008). This result supports one of the major hypothesis of gender differences. A similar analysis for overall SES effects were not significant. The MANOVA test for overall gender x SES effect showed a trend towards significance; the overall F (1.42, df=12a166) was significant at the .16 level.

Race by Gender

Similar repeated analysis of variance and MANOVA tests were used to investigate the relationship of race and gender to semantic space. No significant results for any semantic space were found. No overall race effects or race by gender interactions were found.

Race by SES

Repeated measures analysis of variance and MANOVA were used for race and SES variables. No significant results were found any particular semantic space. The

MANOVA procedure yielded no significant for overall effects or for race by SES interactions.

Prior Rape Experience

The high number of subjects (both males and females) who indicated prior experience with a rape incident prompted further analyses. No statistically significant results were found for gender by prior rape experiences. However, results approaching signficant were found for the semantic space rape-making love. Duncan's multiple range test indicated that those with prior rape experiences viewed rape and making loving as significantly more different than those with no prior rape experience. The overall F for rape experience in the repeated measures analysis of variance was significant at the .06 level.

The MANOVA indicated a trend towards significance for overall prior rape experience effects (p=.3). No gender by rape experience interactions were found. The effects of SES and prior rape experiences were also investigated. Results showed no significant effects of SES by prior rape experiences.

The interaction between race and prior rape experience was calculated. No signficant results were found for race by rape experience interactions.

Semantic Space Results

Overall analysis of mean Z-scores for each semantic space yielded the following conclusions:

1. Assault and Rape were viewed as highly similar.
2. Assault and Making-Love were viewed as dissimilar.
3. Rape and Making-Love were viewed as dissimilar.
4. Rape and Seducation were perceived as somewhat similar.
5. Assault and Seduction produced mixed perceptions.
6. Seduction and Making-Love were viewed similarly.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm other research that found gender differences in attitudes toward rape. Most significantly for this study, those differences were found between the concepts of assault and seduction, and between seduction and making love. Males viewed seduction and making love as similar, while females viewed seduction and assault as similar.

The only effect of SES was demonstrated in interaction between gender and SES on the assault-making love semantic space. Otherwise SES was not a significant variable. No effects of race or family type were found. Only gender appeared to be a powerful variable.

It was significant in these findings that over 30% of the subjects reported having prior experience with a rape incident. Analysis using prior rape experiencs as an independent variable yielded some significant differences, most noticable with the assault-seduction and assault-making love semantic spaces. In fact, prior rape experience negated the gender effect. That is, there were no differences between males and females when both had had both prior experience with rape. With no prior personal experience with rape, males and females did show different attitudes. Thus, males view assault and seduction as more similar to rape than to making love when someone they know has been raped. This finding suggests that further studies of attitudes toward rape include prior rape experience as a blocking variable.

Implications

In view of all the recent attention in the media toward rape, rape trials, and rape victims, this study still finds that males and females view rape, assault, seduction, and making love differently. While both groups view rape and making love as different, females view assault and seduction as similar to rape.

However, overall, males view seduction as similar to making love. This difference in attitudes helps to perpetuate the "rape victim as seductress" mythology.

The large number of subjects who reported a rape incident is consistent with the growing concensus that rape occurs much more frequently than is reported. Rape experience was evenly distributed across gender, race, and social economic status, more evidence for the fact that rape is not confined to a particular racial or economic boundary.

The single most important finding of this study is that the impact of a rape experience on close family members is clearly demonstrated. Attitudes of males who had a close family member or friend who have been raped, revealed different attitudes from males with no prior contact. Further attention should also be directed to the impact of rape on significant others, in educational and supportive activities, as well as research. If the impact of rape can somehow be imputed through an education intervention prior to an actual occurance, a significant preventive measure will have been developed.

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Table 1

Mean Z Transformed Scores

Semantic Space by Gender by SES

Semantic Space	Gender	SES		
		H	M	L
Assault-Seduction	M	.05	.15	-.12
	F	.40	.00	.22
Seduction-Making Love	M	.51	.09	.38
	F	.05	.40	.35
Assault-Rape	M	1.45	1.53	1.42
	F	1.48	1.24	1.27
Assault-Making Love	M	.39	-.38	-.39
	F	-.45	-.41	-.35
Seduction-Rape	M	.14	.22	-.01
	F	.33	-.03	.16
Rape-Making Love	M	-.43	-.53	-.38
	F	-.45	-.44	-.33

Table 2

MANOVA Results

Source	Multivariate F	df	Univariate F: Assault x Rape	Assault x Seduction	Assault x Making Love	Rape x Seduction	Rape x Making Love	Seduction x Making Love
Gender	3.14**	6,84	1.00	2.44	0.00	0.01	0.76	0.02
SES	0.76	12,150	.22	1.41	0.17	0.87	1.50	0.33
Prior Rape Experience	1.25	6,81	0.58	0.41	0.74	0.47	3.63**	0.07
Gender x SES	1.42	12,166	0.50	2.37*	0.19	0.99	0.80	1.88+
Gender x Prior Rape Experience	.44	6,81	0.58	1.45	0.28	0.37	1.56	0.32

+ $p < .10$
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$